



safe boating hints on

# personal flotation devices

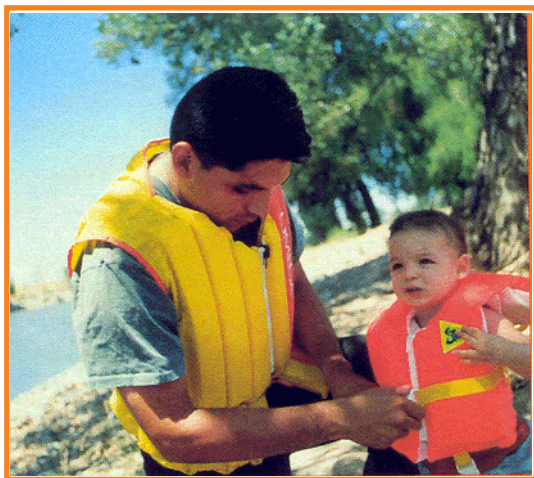


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## What is a PFD?

A personal flotation device (PFD) is the cheapest form of insurance you can buy. It may be a jacket, a vest, a cushion, or a ring buoy, that will serve as a lifesaving aid. Most boating accidents involve falls overboard, capsizings, or sinkings. A properly fitted and correctly used PFD can save your life. In fact, 85% of the boaters who drown as a result of boating accidents would have survived if they had simply been wearing the life jackets most of them carried on board.

## PFDs and the Law

State law requires that all children 11 years of age or younger wear a Type I, II, III or V U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket while on board a vessel that is 26 feet or less in length while the vessel is under way. Exceptions:

- on a sailboat, if the child is restrained by a harness tethered to the sailboat, OR
- if the child is in an enclosed cabin.

In addition, any person aboard a personal watercraft, or being towed behind a vessel on water skis, an aquaplane or similar device, must wear a Type I, II, III or V Coast Guard-approved life jacket.

Exceptions: The law does not apply to performers engaged in professional exhibitions, official regattas, marine parades, or tournaments. Any person engaged in slalom skiing on a marked course, or barefoot, jump or trick water skiing, may instead wear a wetsuit designed for the activity and labeled by the manufacturer as a water ski wetsuit. However, for each skier who elects to wear a wetsuit, a Type I, II, III or V life jacket must be carried on board. Persons using any underwater maneuvering device are exempt from wearing a life jacket. An underwater maneuvering device is any towed or self-powered apparatus designed for underwater use that a person can pilot through diving, turning and surfacing maneuvers.

Inflatable PFDs - The U.S. Coast Guard-approved inflatable PFDs in 1996. Only certain brands are Coast Guard approved, so check the label. While activation upon impact is not a required feature, inflatables must be equipped, at a minimum, with both a manual (pull) and oral inflation system. They are only approved for persons 16 years of age or older, and must be wearable-type PFDs.

The number and type of U.S. Coast Guard-approved PFDs required to be carried on a vessel depends on the length of the craft and the number of persons on board. There are five types of PFDs approved for use aboard recreational craft. **State** and federal law requires that:

- All boats less than 16 feet in length, and canoes and kayaks of any length, must carry a Type I, II, or III **wearable** PFD of the appropriate size for each person on board.
- All boats 16 feet or over in length, except canoes and kayaks, must carry one **wearable** (Type I, II, or III) of the appropriate size for each person on board and one **throwable** (Type IV) device in each boat.

A Type V PFD may be carried in lieu of any wearable PFD required, but only if the Type V is approved for the activity in which the boat is being used. A Type V hybrid PFD must be worn in order to be acceptable.

PFD Types I, II, and III must be “readily accessible.” This means they may not be kept inside a plastic bag or protective covering, they must be easy to reach, and must be stowed with the straps untied. All throwable PFDs (Type IV) must be “immediately available.” The law requires that they be kept in an open area where persons on board can reach them quickly in an emergency.

A PFD must be in good and serviceable condition in order to meet legal requirements. If it is torn, damaged, rotten, punctured, or otherwise unserviceable, or if straps or fasteners are damaged or missing, it no longer meets legal requirements.

Besides being in good and serviceable condition, a PFD must be of the appropriate size for the intended wearer, and display a U.S. Coast Guard approval number.

## U.S. Coast Guard Approval

In order for a PFD to meet legal requirements, it must be U.S. Coast Guard approved. That means that the device meets detailed specifications concerning the performance and design of the equipment. Coast Guard approval is shown by a stencil marking or tag on the PFD. This tag or marking shows the name and address of the manufacturer and the Coast Guard approval number. It also shows the amount of flotation in the device and the PFD type (I, II, III, IV, or V).

There are many flotation devices available that are not Coast Guard-approved and do not meet legal requirements. Other devices that are not approved include wet suits and water-ski belts.

Windsurfers are not required by state law to wear PFDs, although some local jurisdictions may so require in areas under their control. However, wearing an appropriate PFD while windsurfing is strongly recommended.

## Which Type PFD?

There are five types of PFDs (I, II, III, IV, and V), each intended for different uses. Within the legal requirements, the type of PFD you choose to carry on board is a matter of personal choice. Some types offer greater protection, and some offer greater freedom of movement or are designed for special uses. Note that PFDs are designed to perform as described in calm water and when the wearer is not wearing any other flotation material (such as a wet suit). PFDs with greater buoyancy offer better chances for survival in high seas where large waves can engulf a swimmer.

### Type I Offshore Life Jacket



Intended for use offshore in open or coastal waters, or potentially rough seas where quick rescue may not be available. A Type I PFD will turn most unconscious persons face-up in the water. It is the most effective PFD for use in rough water because it provides the maximum amount of buoyancy (22 pounds) available. It is reversible and is available in only two sizes, adult (90 lbs. or more) and child (less than 90 lbs.).

### Type II Near-Shore Buoyant Vest



Designed for general boating activities and suitable for calm, inland water, or for activities where quick rescue is available. A Type II is not suitable for extended or overnight survival in rough or cold water. A Type II PFD will turn many but not all persons face-up in the water. Type IIs are available in several sizes: adult (90 lbs. or more), child-Medium (50 lbs. to 90 lbs.), child-Small (less than 50 lbs.) and infant (less than 30 lbs.). An approved Type II provides 15.5 pounds of buoyancy.

### Type III Flotation Aid



Designed for general boating activities or specialized activities such as hunting, skiing, fishing, canoeing, and kayaking. Type III PFDs are intended for use on calm water, in fair weather and daylight, where quick rescue is available. A Type III PFD is designed to provide a stable face-up position in calm water for a conscious person floating with head tilted back. A Type III PFD is not intended to turn or maintain an unconscious wearer face-up in the water. If used for a special activity,

it should be worn at all times. A Type III provides 15.5 pounds of buoyancy and is available in many sizes. One special Type III PFD, called a floatcoat, provides not only flotation, but also some protection against hypothermia, as well as against impact injury.

## Type IV      Throwable Devices: Ring Buoys, Buoyant Cushions



A Type IV PFD is intended to be thrown to a person who has fallen overboard, and is designed to be grasped and held by the user until rescued. It may be a buoyant cushion, ring buoy or horseshoe buoy. Cushion-style PFDs are not intended to be worn. If worn on the back, a cushion-style PFD will turn the wearer face-down in the water. A Type IV PFD is of no use to an unconscious or exhausted person and is not recommended for nonswimmers or children. It is not suitable for rough or cold water survival. It provides enough buoyancy (ring buoys have 16.5 pounds and cushions 18 pounds) for users to keep their heads above water. It is suitable for use on boats under 16 feet, in calm, inland waters where quick rescue is likely. On boats 16 feet and over, one Type IV PFD is required, in addition to wearable PFD requirements.

## Type V      Special Use Devices



PULL  
HANDLE  
TO  
INFLATE

**Special Use:** Designed and approved for restricted uses or specific activities such as windsurfing or commercial whitewater rafting. This type of PFD is only acceptable when used for the activity for which it is designed. The label on the Type V PFD indicates the approved activity, restrictions or limitations, and equivalent performance type (whether its flotation is equivalent to a Type I, II, or III). If a Type V PFD is approved and identified for commercial use only, it does not satisfy requirements for recreational watercraft, unless otherwise specified. Special use Type V PFDs range in buoyancy from 15.5 to 22 pounds.

**Hybrid Device:** The hybrid Type V PFD uses inflation in addition to the type of buoyant flotation material found in traditional PFDs. To be acceptable for use on recreational craft, the hybrid Type V PFD must be worn, except when the boat is not under way, or when the boater is in an enclosed space, such as a boat cabin. It provides a minimum of 7.5 pounds of buoyancy when deflated, and 22 pounds when inflated. When fully inflated, a hybrid's flotation performance is equivalent to that of a Type I, II, or III (the performance type will be marked on the I

abel). A hybrid PFD is more comfortable than some other types of PFD because it is less bulky when deflated. Testing the hybrid in the water before use is recommended to determine whether the buoyancy inherent in the device when inflated provides sufficient flotation. For hybrids using CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges for inflation, the cartridges must be inspected periodically to ensure that they have not been spent. The user must accept the responsibility for the care of the device.

A hybrid PFD may be approved for adults weighing over 90 lbs. (40 kg.), youths weighing 50-90 lbs. (23-40 kg.), small children weighing 30-50 lbs. (14-23 kg.), or for the weight range for which that style of PFD has been tested, as indicated on the label.

## Recommended Use

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Children, the elderly, and nonswimmers should always wear their PFDs while the boat is under way. In rough water it is recommended that everyone on board wear a PFD.

When boating in cold water, PFDs should be worn AT ALL TIMES. Cold water can numb the extremities and slow reflexes almost immediately. Should you fall into cold water, you may not have the opportunity or the ability to don a PFD.

Each passenger on board should know where the PFDs are located and should make sure their wearable device fits properly. It is a good idea to hold a practice emergency drill on the proper use of PFDs at least once each year. Practice swimming and floating while wearing a PFD. Try putting one on while in the water.

Families should mark each person's device with their name and stow it with the name facing up in an accessible, well-ventilated area out of the sun. Children's PFDs should be checked periodically for proper fit.

Remember that a PFD is considered an aid; it should not be considered a substitute for good swimming ability.

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**BOATING SAFETY CLASSES** explaining required and recommended equipment for small boats and offering training in good seamanship are conducted throughout California by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the U.S. Power Squadrons and certain chapters of the American Red Cross. For information on Coast Guard Auxiliary and Power Squadron classes, call (800) SEA-SKIL (732-7545) or (800) 368-5647. The Department of Boating and Waterways offers a free home study course entitled *California Boating; A Course For Safe Boating*. For more information, e-mail us at [pubinfo@dbw.ca.gov](mailto:pubinfo@dbw.ca.gov), or phone (916) 263-1331 or toll free (888) 326-2822, or write: Department of Boating and Waterways, 2000 Evergreen Street, Suite 100, Sacramento, California 95815-3888. Visit our Website at [www.dbw.ca.gov](http://www.dbw.ca.gov).